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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION #24: POLLS AND PARANOIA

REF: A. (A) SANTO DOMINGO 0957

[1](#)B. (B) SANTO DOMINGO 1174 (NOTAL)

[1](#)1. (SBU) This is number 24 in our series on the Dominican presidential election:

#### The Dominican Election: Polls and Paranoia

Many Dominicans fear a stolen presidential election. With each succeeding poll that confirms opposition PLD candidate Leonel Fernandez's commanding lead over President Mejia (PRD/PPH), rumors fly that Mejia will declare an emergency as a pretext to postpone the May 16 election. After the failure of the PPH's "law of slogans" scheme to alter the electoral rules (Ref A), the latest conspiracy theories suppose that Mejia will use the Haiti crisis and its real or imagined impact here as grounds for suspending the election and illegally extending his own mandate. We hear this from otherwise sober private sector and political leaders. Other commentators dismiss this as poppycock; so do we. Mejia's campaign chief claims that newly inaugurated public works, more subsidized food supplies, and a hoped-for economic uptick can restore the President's popularity; frankly, that seems just as far-fetched.

A Gallup survey of 1200 respondents conducted February 18-22 closely tracked with an earlier Penn Schoen poll (Ref A). Gallup showed Fernandez with 63.1 percent of voter intentions and PRSC candidate Eduardo Estrella and President Mejia statistically tied with 14.9 and 14.6 percent. Rejection rates were even more dramatic: 73.8 percent would not vote for Mejia, vs. 16.7 percent for Fernandez and 14.0 percent for Estrella. In a hypothetical second round between Fernandez and Estrella, Gallup says Leonel wins by 64.9 to 27.5 percent, and if Mejia is the opponent, Leonel would bury him 73.8 to 18.3 percent. In the unreal event that Estrella and Mejia faced off in a second round, Estrella would win 62.9 to 16.0 percent, with 17.6 percent refusing to vote for either. Majorities said they believed "conditions for electoral fraud" exist and disagreed with the proposition that GODR authorities would carry out clean elections without major problems.

Mejia's campaign director Eligio Jaquez, who assumed the post about February 18 after resigning as Secretary of State for agriculture, told the Ambassador on February 23. "We are in second place." He said negotiations were well advanced with PRD challengers Rafael "Fello" Subervi and Vice President Milagros Ortiz-Bosch to get them to support Mejia's re-election bid. Jaquez assured us that Subervi would end up as Mejia's vice presidential running mate. (President Mejia gave the Ambassador a different story on February 24, Ref B.) Jaquez said that Mejia and Subervi together could attract many of the 1.7 million registered PRD voters, through direct contact in their communities and local TV and radio. Jaquez acknowledged the pollsters' low ratings of Mejia, and retorted, "They don't know Hipolito." He reminded the Ambassador that in coming weeks, disbursements of international loans would help stabilize the economy and end power blackouts, and said the government would send out more trucks to distribute subsidized food. With this and Mejia's vigorous campaigning in local communities, "We will go up and Fernandez will come down."

Meanwhile, the Dominican rumor mill poured out conspiracy theories. The respected editor of morning tabloid "Diario Libre" on February 26 branded as "suspicious" the alarmist local press treatment of the political violence in neighboring Haiti and the Dominican Armed Forces' leaders widely publicized visits to the border. He insinuated that the show was a convenient distraction from domestic economic and political problems and might become an excuse for the President to postpone the election because of the disturbed "climate." These rumors bubbled up in table talk among prominent business executives who attended the Ambassador's February 25 luncheon speech at the American Chamber of

Commerce here. Econoff heard the same musings from wealthy Dominican industrialists at dinner that night.

The Ambassador's wide-ranging talk included for the n-th time the U.S. call for clean, fair and transparent elections. Reaction has been enthusiastic. Monsignor Agripino Nunez, chair of the watchdog Monitoring Commission, telephoned to congratulate the Ambassador and, when he discovered the Ambassador was out of the country, he faxed a note of praise, particularly stressing his satisfaction that the United States was working with the OAS to send international election observers.

PRD president Vicente Sanchez Baret, one of Mejia's campaign advisors, publicly dismissed the notion that the Haiti unrest would affect the elections on this side of the island. "We are a mature democracy, we're going to have elections, and whoever wins, wins," he said. "We don't put much stock in polls," he added. "We're mobilizing the vast PRD membership and working toward the vote count on May 16."

Technical directors from the Central Electoral Board (JCE) had met on February 24 with prominent USAID-funded NGO Participacion Ciudadana to explain in detail measures being taken to resolve acknowledged defects in the voting register, a main target of the JCE's recent critics.

But the electoral anxieties have not dissipated. A group of evangelical church pastors for human rights has announced a prayer campaign, to run from now until May 16, asking divine intervention to ensure a free election that reflects the popular will, and general acceptance of the outcome.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This report, our entire election series and other current material can be consulted on our SIPRNET website: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/index.cfm> .  
MARSHALL